



# Berkeley on Language in the 'New Theory of Vision' and the 'Principles'

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## **Berkeley on Language in the *Theory of Vision* and the *Principles***

### **Résumé**

Dans la NTV, Berkeley assimile la vision à un langage que Dieu parle aux hommes et, parallèlement, dans les *Principes*, il rapproche les méthodes de la nature d'un langage divin. Mon papier est une étude des caractéristiques de la notion de langage telle que Berkeley l'utilise dans ces deux contextes et de la portée des deux analogies. Je me demanderai donc si la notion de langage utilisée dans les *Principes* est la même que celle de la NTV et surtout si la Nature des *Principes* est un langage de la même manière que la vision est un langage dans la NTV. Je crois que la comparaison entre les deux textes sur la question du langage permet de découvrir les liens théoriques effectifs existant entre les deux textes.

### **Summary**

In his *New Theory of Vision*, Berkeley compares vision to a language in which God speaks to mankind. In an apparently similar way, in the *Principles* Berkeley compares the methods of Nature to a divine language. The present paper is a study of the features of the notion of language used by Berkeley in these two contexts and of the purport of the two analogies. One of the questions explored is whether the notion of language in the *Principles* is the same as in *New Theory of Vision*, and more particularly whether Nature, in the *Principles*, is conceived as a language in the same manner as vision in the *New Theory of Vision*. I will try to show that the comparison between the two texts on the question of divine language enables us to discover their theoretical relationship.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries a model that might be called semiotic was employed to account for various aspects of nature and of perception. According to this model, natural phenomena and perceptions are connected to their causes in virtue of a constant relation which does not necessarily imply a resemblance between the sign and its meaning.

In the *New Theory of Vision*<sup>1</sup>, Berkeley claims that visual ideas constitute a language in the proper sense of the term and that this language is the language that God speaks to men. With this thesis of a divine optical language, Berkeley

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<sup>1</sup> G. Berkeley, *An essay toward a New Theory of Vision*, in *The Works of George Berkeley Bishop of Cloyne* (Ed. by A.A. Luce and T.E. Jessop), Nelden, Kraus Reprint, 1979, vol. 1, hereafter abbreviated to as NTV, followed by section number.

transforms the general semiotic model into a linguistic one. In the philosophy of Berkeley the idea of language plays a particularly important role, as it is not just limited to being an explanatory model, but is additionally used as a key idea for explaining visual perception and for offering proofs of the existence of God in NTV and *Alciphron*.

The notion of language used by Berkeley in his proof of the divine visual language is relatively complex because he specifies not only the features of the relation between visual signs and their tactual significations, but equally the ways or rules according to which a limited number of signs may combine in order to give rise to a potentially infinite number of new meanings.

In this paper I want to demonstrate the links that exist between *Principles of Human Nature* and NTV on the topic of language. More particularly I want to show that Berkeley tries to strengthen the arguments of PHK for the existence of God by means of the NTV's thesis that vision is a language. The relations between NTV and PHK therefore do not play themselves out at the level of the theory of abstraction, but rather at that of visual language.

First of all I will deal with language as it is presented in NTV, then with language in the first and second editions of PHK, and finally with the relations between these texts.

Berkeley defines the force, use and nature of language in the fourth dialogue of *Alciphron* as follows:

[...] the arbitrary use of sensible signs, which have no similitude or necessary connexion with the things signified; so as by the apposite management of them suggest and exhibit to my mind an endless variety of things, differing in nature, time and place; thereby informing me, entertaining me, and directing me how to act, not only with regard to things near and present, but also with regard to things distant and future. [...]<sup>2</sup>

Two characteristics therefore seem to be essential if a thing is to be a language: first there must be a system of signs linked to their significations neither by necessity nor resemblance; further, it is necessary that the arrangement and the

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<sup>2</sup> *Alciphron or the Minute Philosopher*, in *Works, op. cit.*, vol. 3; IV, 7; hereafter abbreviated to A, followed by dialogue and section number.

organisation of the signs amongst and between themselves should be such that their significations could be multiplied infinitely. The first aspect has to do with the foundation of the relation between sign and signification, whilst the second concerns the manner of combining signs in order to achieve new significations. In the PHK and TVV, Berkeley specifies that the arrangement of signs should be performed *by rules* and *with wise contrivance* (cf. TVV and PHK).

In the NTV, Berkeley shows that we do not immediately see the distance, size etc., of objects, but that there are ideas immediately perceived by the sight which, by virtue of an association learnt by experience, function as the signs of corresponding tactile ideas. These idea-signs can establish a rule as they admit of degrees. Thus when, for example, the spirit has experienced a ‘habitual connection between the several degrees of confusion and distance; the greater confusion still implying the lesser distance, and the lesser confusion the greater distance of the object’, the different degrees of confusion of a visible image have come to signify different degrees of distance, a greater confusion indicating a lesser distance and vice versa. Another ‘gradual’ sign of distance is found in the variable disposition of the eyes.

Discussing the case of faintness in an image of the moon produced by the interposition of an opaque screen, which, despite the increased faintness of the visual image does not modify at all the visible magnitude of the moon, Berkeley holds that the relation between the signs and significations of visual language function in exactly the same way as the relations of verbal language, as both the former and the latter depend on context, and it is only when taken in that context that the tangible signification is determined (NTV 73).

The dependence on context, and the possibility of illusions as in the cases of mirrors or paintings, are confirmations of the contingency of the relation between the visible sign and its tactile signification.

In *Alciphron* IV.12, Berkeley seems to intuit that the difference between visual signs and significations and the phenomena of nature is that visual signs, differing in this respect from natural phenomena, testify to the existence of a God ‘good and provident’, ‘actually and intimately present’, whereas natural phenomena or the laws of movement don’t testify to a spirit of this kind.

I come now to the idea of language in the PHK, in order to show points of convergence and divergence in relation to the idea of language in NTV.

In the PHK the reader is led to reflect on language, its use and structure in two places. First of all in the introduction, and then in sections 64-66 and 103-09 of the first part.

In sections 65-66 Berkeley firstly affirms that the relation between natural phenomena need not be seen as a relation between causes and effects, but as a relation between signs and things signified. Secondly, Berkeley affirms that the regularity with which phenomena manifest themselves are established in order that an infinity of phenomena can be signified by a limited number of elements or signs, in the same way (as he explains) that in language a limited number of letters combined with one another can form an extremely large number of words.

Section 104 introduces the theme of mechanical explanations of nature. Knowledge of phenomena, claims Berkeley (105, picking up on section 65), is nothing other than the discovery of regular relations (analogies) which allow us to infer what might take place at different moments in time and space. The problem is – says Berkeley (106) – that scientists have a tendency to overextend the application of rules found to apply in the case of certain natural phenomena, as in mechanist explanations of nature that describe attraction as a universal principle. Such explanations suggest that all phenomena embody one single variety of quantitative relations, illustrate a single rule and therefore – such scientists presume – a universal rule.

However, Berkeley asserts that a close observation of phenomena such as the vertical growth of plants or the consistency of the relative position of the fixed stars obliges us to recognise that 1) attraction is not universal and that therefore 2) the laws of movement described by them are not necessary, and 3) that they are rather the result of the free choice of a ‘governing Spirit’. The vertical growth of plants as well as the constant relation of the fixed stars are not simply the exceptions to a supposedly universal rule of attraction, but rather the incarnation of different rules (or principles) freely chosen by God.

Berkeley’s progression from the plurality of rules to free choice and a ‘governing spirit’ - as if it were somehow difficult for there to be several blind mechanical principles which are applied mechanically to different kinds of objects - is quite surprising. Moreover, having recognised the existence of a ‘governing spirit’, Berkeley announces the analogy according to which

108. [...] the steady and consistent Methods of Nature, may not unfitly be Styled the *Language* of its *Author*, whereby he discovers his *Attributes* to our View, and directs us how to act for the Convenience and Felicity of Life. [...]

The essence of Berkeley's proposal remains the same in the second edition, when, retaining the sections on the non-universality of attraction, and the plurality of laws of natural movements (vertical growth of plants, elasticity of the air, etc), he no longer invokes the resemblance of the methods of nature to a book that may be observed ('perusing') in choosing to pay attention either 1. to the manner of reducing particular phenomena to general rules or 2. in delighting in the beauty of nature observed (section 109). Also, in section 108 of the second edition he corrects the phrase 'this language (if I may so call it) of the Author of Nature' by substituting for it the following phrase: 'those signs instituted by the Author of Nature'. I think that in the two editions of the PHK the comparison between the methods of nature and a divine language is metaphorical. This seems evident when one compares the expressions used by Berkeley to present the divine language thesis in PHK and NTV. In NTV 146 (first edition), Berkeley writes: 'Upon the whole, I think we may fairly conclude that the proper objects of vision constitute the universal language of nature', whereas in PHK Berkeley uses forms of expression such as that the methods of nature 'may be styled a language' and 'if I may so call it'. Thus, I think that the principal difference between the first and second editions here is the change from a language taken in the metaphorical sense, and a mere collection of signs. It is as if Berkeley had taken stock of the difficulty of incorporating the methods of nature into the linguistic model, and had chosen a less demanding model, that of a system of signs.

I would like to suggest, then, that Berkeley is well aware that the proof of the existence of God founded on visual language is stronger than that of PHK, which I shall call an argument by design, or that, at the very least, they demonstrate the existence of spirits having different characteristics. Berkeley is explicit on this point in *Alciphron*. I think that his strategy consists in ensuring that the theory of a visual language of NTV is in a certain manner comprised within the philosophy of PHK. It is for this reason that he always mentions the thesis of a visual language in referring to the reading of NTV, as much in PHK as in *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* and evidently in *Alciphron*; and he gives a prominent place to visual phenomena even in *Siris* when he returns to the thesis of the language of the author of nature.

To conclude I would like to defend two theses. The first is that the NTV was developed in a manner independent of the anti-materialist and anti-abstractionist theses of the PHK. The principle thesis of the NTV is that vision is a language God speaks to men and this thesis has no immediate implications for the existence of matter or for the possibility of abstract ideas.

The second thesis which I have tried to defend is that the reference to a divine language is much weaker in the PHK than in NTV and that Berkeley tries to ensure that the theory of visual language of NTV is in a certain manner comprised in the philosophy of the PHK.